

Here follows the review of
***Huckleberry Days:
A Trout, Shooting and Reading Life***
by Garrett Evans

written by Nicholas Meihuizen
and published in ***Scrutiny2*** 17(1) 2012



Huckleberry days

NICHOLAS MEIHUIZEN

23459220@nwu.ac.za

Department of English

North-West University

Garrett Evans. *Huckleberry days: a troutling, shooting and reading life*. 2010, Echoing Green Press, Fish Hoek.

This book comprises 98 vignettes, written in the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, South Africa and New Zealand. As the book has 152 pages, the average length of the vignettes is about a page and a half. These are not fragments, though. The word “vignette” stems from the French, “vigne”, the shoot of the vine, used as an emblem on page-borders or on decorative scrolls. The implication is that the page is special, has been singled out and so is in party dress. “Vignette” also suggests a frozen scene or attitude so packed with information that it in itself tells a story. To conflate both senses, then, the special page of the vignette bears a great deal of information. This is why, at times, Evans’ vignettes are prose-poems. Like lyric poetry, they bear more emotional and evocative weight than their size apparently warrants. As a whole, they constitute a memoir, almost in the form of a journal made up of discrete entries, with various characters, locales, memories, books, writers, and creatures appearing and reappearing.

Much of the space in the book is given to “troutling” and “shooting”, a fair amount to “reading”. But the troutling and shooting are also a type of reading. Evans reads his natural surroundings with precision. This “reading”, in fact, seems to be much the point of the troutling and shooting. The routines of fishing and the hunt offer him a means to engage with the surroundings, what he at various times in the book calls “reality”. Thus, while he carefully lists his guns, cartridges, rods, and flies, and describes the activities associated with them, his aim is not really to bag the game, but to be at one with them in their natural surroundings (68). Again and again he describes the beauty of the trout, tells of the melodious calls of the birds, the prescient excitement of the retrievers. Overarching all is the natural scene: riverside, lakeside, burn, mountain slopes, valley, woods, grasses, rocks, morning light, mist, sunset colours, the landscape in moonlight, the sound of waters, the roll of thunder in the Drakensberg. In the midst of this is Evans himself, experiencing all he describes in simple terms, never extravagantly, more in the manner of Hemingway than the Romantics, though his muted tones cannot conceal the egotistical sublime of the Romantics as he

unashamedly interfuses experience with his own strong emotions, usually to do with the lost time of “far off things” and the transience of the present moment. This is the emotion of a man in love with life, his senses calibrated by his reading of Li Po and other Chinese masters who related the nuances of nature to the nuances of human feelings about nature and time.

“Man is in love, and loves what vanishes”, Yeats once wrote (“Nineteen hundred and nineteen” 429–30). These words might be the leitmotif of Evans’ book. But Yeats concludes: “What more is there to say?” Evans, always garrulous, as he himself confesses, has much more to say. He would tell us of the woods of the Blue Ridge mountains (5), Notre Dame of Paris (57–9), Sterkfontein (74–6), Mtunzini (65), and the “delectable South Island countryside” of New Zealand (131); of Scott Fitzgerald (6), Ibn al-Arabi (13), Richard Burton (42–3), Salvador Dali (53), Roy Campbell (93–4), and Jung Chang (author of *Wild swans*); of Siegfried Sassoon’s “little things beloved and held are best” (15), and of the delights of *Tarka the otter* (21). He would obliquely caution us not to neglect Denys Watkins-Pitchford (“BB”), Jack London, Percy Fitzpatrick, C.S. Forester (whose Captain Hornblower novels inspired Patrick O’Brian’s wonderful Aubrey Maturin stories), and Richard Jefferies, author of the 1885 futuristic novel *After London* (22–37). And he would present some of his own fine poetry, an extension in metre of what we sometimes find in the vignettes:

Swans, long necks stretched out, are singing
The simple flying songs of swans,
And from the east, snow whispers down along the
homeward track. (“Fenlands” 29)

The Chinese influence in his own writing is evident where archetypal creatures, their sounds, snow, and a pathway, are impartially presented, that the reader might absorb them silently and experience the feelings arising from the juxtaposition of the various sensuous and psychic elements.

One vignette, though slightly longer than most of the others, is typical: “Tartan and twilight” (43–6). It describes in some detail a fishing excursion from the university at Nottingham up into Scotland. The weather is warm and sunny: “the sun was out all day and every day, shining on tanned, active people and smiling cats and dogs” (43). The first stream at which he and his companion fish is “twenty or thirty yards wide, and in most places only a foot or so deep, running over countless thousands of small white pebbles, and bordered on both sides by high, open hills on which the sun was just striking”. We are told of flies, such as the “small, dry pheasant tail” (44), and “that most beautiful of salmon flies, the Silver Doctor”, and a rod, the “light Sharpe’s seven-foot cane job” (45). Apart from the salmoning and trouting, the whiskey sampling is also good: “a number of distilleries ... used the water from the little burns running through the peat ... I was ... offered several glasses of remarkably good scotch, though it was well before opening time” (45). His return to the university is also notable for the deep mood running through it: “The deserted campus was attractive, and it was pleasant feeling well tanned and healthy, shuffling through my books and papers in a library filled with sunlight, and echoing with the songs of blackbirds and thrushes” (46).

Like all hunter-gatherers, Evans, one feels, is on a quest; perhaps for the equivalent of the “Happy hunting ground” (125) here on earth:

Frequently I return there in memory, but also I am now able to return to the hills of Westmorland, and to the

streams running to the sea on Skye. But perhaps best, to the loud silence and great beauty of the little known lochs far above Mallaig, where one may stand and listen to silence, trout, curlews and the horizons. (46)

The route of this quest, in Romantic fashion, is within. But it is not an imaginative quest. It has more to do with memory and the ability of

memory to satisfy a need for union with nature and the best moments of fleeting experience.

Work cited

Yeats, W.B. 1957. *The variorum edition of the poems of W.B. Yeats*. Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach (eds). New York: Macmillan.